DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 462 511 UD 034 819

AUTHOR Yeh, Christine J.; Drost, Christopher
TITLE Bridging Identities among Ethnic Minority Youth in Schools. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, New York, NY.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO EDO-UD-02-2
ISSN ISSN-0889-8049
PUB DATE 2002-02-00
NOTE 4p.; Digest number 173.
CONTRACT ED-99-CO-0035
AVAILABLE FROM ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, Institute for Urban and Minority Education, Box 40, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027. Tel: 800-601-4868 (Toll Free); Web site: http://www.eric-web.tc.columbia.edu.
PUB TYPE ERIC Publications (071) -- ERIC Digests in Full Text (073)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; *Adjustment (to Environment); Counseling; Cultural Differences; Diversity (Student); Elementary Secondary Education; *Ethnicity; Minority Group Children; Multicultural Education; *Racial Identification; Student Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS *Dominant Culture; ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

This digest examines the nature of multiple identities among ethnic minority youth and how youth bridge conflicting messages about cultural ways of being. It discusses how the school environment contributes to student internalization of various identities. Culturally diverse students often face contrasting notions of self because they must function in schools organized around the values and goals of the dominant culture. Minority children have difficulty internalizing certain aspects of the dominant culture, showing poorer school achievement and higher dropout rates due in part to the incongruent expectations, motives, social behaviors, language, and cognitive patterns of teachers and majority students. Student attitudes toward achievement differ by culture. How discrepancies in sense of self are understood by minority students and what is seen as normal by the dominant culture may differ significantly. As a consequence of this narrow view, minority students are often dismissed or pathologized in comparison to white students. School counselors must understand cultural differences in order to effectively help diverse students adjust and succeed. A comprehensive multicultural curriculum can provide students with broad-based knowledge of subjects covered, foster their understanding and appreciation of diversity, and promote positive inter-ethnic relations. (Contains 10 references.) (SM)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 462 511

Bridging Identities among Ethnic Minority Youth in Schools

ERIC Digest

By

Christine J. Yeh and Christopher Drost

Number 173 February 2002 EDO-UD-02-2

ISSN-0889-8049

ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education
Institute for Urban and Minority Education
Teachers College, Columbia University

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

UD034819

ERIC
Educational Resources Information Center
ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education
DIGEST

Number 173, February 2002 EDO-UD-02-2 ISSN 0889 8049

BRIDGING IDENTITIES AMONG ETHNIC MINORITY YOUTH IN SCHOOLS

Learning to bridge and negotiate contrasting cultural identities is a fundamental concern for ethnic minority youth, especially since they often hold very different cultural values, communication styles, and interpersonal relationship norms (Carter, 1991) from those of the dominant white culture (native born Americans). For students of mixed race, developing this competency may be even more difficult because they are likely to embody cultural and social norms of more than one ethnic group. But, regardless of whether an individual claims a single or multiple ethnic heritage, many factors determine identity and sense of self: race, ethnicity, gender, social class, religion, generation, etc. It is essential for school professionals to recognize students who have problems with conflicting identities and to provide appropriate interventions, because unaddressed difficulties may evolve into significant mental health problems, such as psychopathology, depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem; social and relational concerns; academic failure; and gang involvement (Inose & Yeh, 2001).

This digest examines the nature of multiple identities among ethnic minority youth and the ways they bridge competing and conflicting messages about cultural ways of being. It also discusses how the school environment contributes to student internalization of various identities and how practitioners may assist youth in developing positive multifaceted self-concepts that contribute to their social-emotional development and self-esteem in school.

The Role of the Dominant Culture in Schools

Youth from culturally diverse backgrounds often face contrasting notions of self because they must function in schools and educational systems that are organized around the values and goals of the "dominant culture." The dominant culture refers to that of the people who are either the greatest in number or who have the most political and economic power. In the United States, the dominant culture has been defined by white European Americans, specifically those very few who have a great amount of power and wealth (Helms, 1990). Students who are not from the dominant culture may be victim to unspoken yet powerful stereotypes and messages about their development and personal identity. Hence, they must learn to negotiate and bridge multiple, and often competing, identities in the schools.

Racial and ethnic minority students must learn to operate successfully in the dominant—white—system since they are evaluated based on its norms. This means that children are expected to develop a sense of autonomy and self-reliance and to accept that the individual is seen as the fundamental, or most important, unit of society (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Such understanding of the self as unique has clear implications for how children are treated in school. Generally speaking, students from collectivistic cultures (see Markus & Kitayama, 1991, for examples) must learn to be assertive, independent, and confident to succeed in schools, but must also be able to shift back to being relational, modest, passive, and family-oriented in at home. Moreover, home and school contexts are only two of the multiple settings in which students learn to operate across cultures. They must also learn to shift and adapt to culture-based role expectation of peers, elders, significant others, etc. (Markus, Mullally, & Kitayama, 1997). Those who are unable to adapt to such competing and fluid role demands are often alienated from society.

Students from diverse cultural backgrounds learn to adapt to Western cultural norms in the school context in many ways. For example, teachers help them identify internal, personal attributes that make each student different and independent from the another. They emphasize positive attributes in students (intelligence, control, maturity, success) in order to build self-esteem. Teachers also help orient children to the future by asking them to consider the questions of what will be, or what they could become (future self). This developed sense of individuality, uniqueness, and freedom of choice can be seen in children as early as preschool (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989).

Minority group children have more difficulty internalizing these aspects of the dominant culture. They show poorer school achievement and have substantially higher dropout rates than majority children, at least in part because of the incongruent expectations, motives, social behaviors, language, and cognitive patterns that teachers and majority students may have.

Identity from a Non-Dominant Culture

Student Attitudes Toward Achievement

Non-Western cultures may be characterized by a strong orientation to family and community (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Yeh & Hwang, 2000). Motivation for achievement may come from a desire to gain access to others and to maintain affiliative ties with peers rather than from a desire to attain personal or individual goals.

To negotiate competing cultural norms and values, students must learn to be biculturally competent (LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993), that is, they must integrate two cultures without feeling the tension between the two. According to the alternation model of bicultural competence (LaFromboise et al., 1993), individuals can adapt their behavior to a given social or cultural context without having to commit to a specific cultural identity. The ability to adjust across contexts and situations may include using different languages, as well as different problem-solving, coping, interpersonal, communication, and motivational styles of interaction.

A way for this orientation to be integrated into the curriculum would be for teachers to introduce more team approaches in the classroom so that children can work together and receive group rewards. Children might be given rewards that enable them to socialize with their peers, or an individualized activity can be paired with a group reward.

Counseling Concerns

Minority cultural values and beliefs, differences in behaviors, language, and worldview, and past power experiences with the dominant culture all influence the success or failure in negotiating identities. For example, how discrepancies in one's sense of self are understood by minority individuals and what is seen as "normal" by the dominant culture may be quite different. The implications of this narrow view of "normality" are that minority individuals are often dismissed or pathologized in comparison to white school children, who are given more long-term support and guidance in schools. Further, the way that students' "adjustment"—how they bridge competing identities across settings and contexts—is evaluated in the schools may predetermine an erroneous negative assessment. For example, children may have identity conflicts and question the essence of who they are at school, but function appropriately and effectively at home or vice versa.

To help students make a positive social and cultural adjustment, school professionals need an understanding of the students' cultural influences and of the many ways that social and emotional problems which emerge in school are perceived, evaluated, and treated around the world (Lutz, 1985). Further, counselors should know the various ways that help is sought out when a problem arises within the family. While children may need help in negotiating their identity or in dealing with other problems, it is not usual for them to seek support services independently; they are referred by teachers and parents, if at all.

School personnel must recognize the level of ethnocentrism that influences their evaluation of children, and facilitate positive change in a child that does not involve stereotyping, overgeneralizing, or pathologizing behavior that is inconsistent with sanctioned dominant culture. They also need to realize that because ethnic minority youth must negotiate multiple identities, their youth selves are shifting and fluid, rather than static across home and school settings (Yeh, 2000). Finally, all school personnel must recognize that culture may impact learning style, and consider the social context in which the child is observed, rather than trying to understand behaviors as unequivocal indicators of a child's individual personality or character.

Multicultural Education

A comprehensive multicultural education curriculum can provide students with rich and broad-based knowledge of the subjects covered, foster their understanding and appreciation of ethnic diversity, and promote positive interethnic relations. Multicultural educators need to tailor their curriculum to the developmental level and interests of children and to understand the different needs of majority and minority children. For example, in early childhood young children have concrete thinking and require experiential learning. Therefore, teachers can help them have personal experiences with other groups, share foods, and learn about different customs and holidays. Adolescents, with abstract thinking skills, can understand diversity through film, literature, and television, and assess how these media contribute to stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination.

Majority children are more likely to be ethnocentric and less aware of ethnic differences. Thus they need more accurate information about other groups and an understanding of the value of diversity in enriching a society. Minority children are typically already familiar with the majority culture, while their own culture has been ignored or disparaged by the curriculum. A better understanding of the strengths and achievements of their own culture will increase their self-esteem.

Conclusion

Negotiating multiple, often contradictory, identities is a complex process for culturally diverse schoolage children. Social, cultural, and political factors unique to their backgrounds influence the process of identity development and the extent to which youth relate to values of the dominant and family cultures. Since identities are not solely dichotomous—home versus school—students may choose to embrace multiple ethnicities (identities) or may find safety in forming a cohesive self. Educators, therefore, should not normalize and pressure children to find a single identity. Rather, they need to acknowledge and accept multiple identities in students without prioritizing one over the other, and encourage students to appreciate their own cultural heritage and norms.

—Christine J. Yeh and Christopher Drost,
Teachers College, Columbia University

References

Carter, R.T. (1991, September-October). Cultural values: A review of empirical research and implications for counseling. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 70*(1), 164-173. (EJ 437 287)

Helms, J.E. (Ed.). (1990). *Black and white racial identity: Theory, research, and practice.* New York: Greenwood.

Inose, M., & Yeh, C.J. (2001, August). *Cultural adjustment difficulties and coping strategies of Asian immigrants.* Poster presented at the American Psychological Association Annual Convention, San Francisco.

LaFromboise, T., Coleman, H.L.K., & Gerton, J. (1993, November). Psychological impact of biculturalism: Evidence and theory. *Psychological Bulletin, 114*(3), 395-412.

Lutz, C. (1985). Depression and the translation of emotional worlds. In A. Kleinman & B. Good (Eds.), *Culture and depression: Studies in the anthropology and cross-cultural psychiatry of affect and disorder* (pp. 63-100). Berkeley: University of California Press.

Markus, H.R., & Kitayama, S. (1991, April). Culture and the self: Implications for cognition, emotion, and motivation. *Psychological Review, 98*(2), 224-253.

Markus, H.R., Mullally, P.R., & Kitayama, S. (1997). Selfways: Diversity in modes of cultural participation. In U. Neisser & D.A. Jopling (Eds.), *The conceptual self in context: Culture, experience, and self-understanding* (pp. 13-61). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Tobin, J.J., Wu, D.Y.H., & Davidson, D.H. (Eds.). (1989). *Preschool in three cultures: Japan, China, and the United States.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Yeh, C.J. (2000, February). *Cultural selves: Complex, multidimensional, dynamic ways of being.* Presentation at the Winter Roundtable on Cross-Cultural Psychology and Education, Teachers College, New York, NY.

Yeh, C.J., & Hwang, M.Y. (2000, Fall). Interdependence in ethnic identity and self: Implications for theory and practice. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 78*(4), 420-429.

This Digest was developed by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. ED-99-CO-0035. The opinions in this Digest do not necessarily reflect the position or policies of OERI or the Department of Education.

ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, Institute for Urban and Minority Education, Box 40, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027, (800) 601-4868. Erwin Flaxman, Director. Wendy Schwartz, Managing Editor.
Web site: http://eric-web.tc.columbia.edu